

Jonah: Reluctant Harbinger of Doom

Jonah 3

¹ The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸ Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Theme Statement

After a failed attempt to escape his prophetic commission, Jonah reluctantly proclaimed a word of doom to the citizens of Nineveh. The Ninevites embraced the word of God and, much to Jonah’s annoyance, repented of their evil ways.

Exploring the Word

Even people only superficially familiar with the Bible recognize Jonah as “the guy who was swallowed by a whale.” Such people, however, confuse poor Jonah with Pinocchio. Jonah was swallowed by a “large fish” (1:17) in this extended parable.

That the book is a type of parable, however, serves as our starting point. Parables convey Truth with a capital T, even if they are not historical, as virtually all of Jesus’ parables demonstrate. Also, like many of Jesus’ parables, Jonah is deliberately funny, starting with his name. Jonah in Hebrew means “dove,” an appropriate moniker for this flighty prophet!

Jonah 1:1—2:10 Life on the briny deep (scenes 1 and 2)
If we consider each chapter a scene in a comic drama, both chapters 1 and 2 occur on the Mediterranean Sea. The Lord commanded Jonah to travel “to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it” (1:2). Instead of obeying, Jonah headed straight to the seaport of Joppa and bought passage to Tarshish, “away from the presence of the LORD” (1:3).

The mariners soon came to learn that a raging storm had been precipitated by their sole passenger. Jonah told them their only solution lay in tossing him into the sea, which, after a prayer to Yahweh, they reluctantly did. The sea instantly calmed, and the last thing Jonah saw before sinking down was pagan sailors, now converted Yahweh worshipers, offering sacrifices on the ship!

The big fish serves in the story like a submarine delivery service.

While Jonah lingered in the fish, he sang a psalm of deliverance, but it was surely a song laced with sarcasm. Whether it was his derision or his pseudo-piety that proved indigestible, when the Lord spoke again to the fish—and here the KJV translation nails it—“it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land” (2:10).

Jonah 3:1-10 A quick stop at Nineveh (scene 3)

The Lord again commanded Jonah, now covered with fish slime and sand, to proclaim “the message that I tell you” (3:2). This time, Jonah obeyed. Well, sort of.

The narrator wants us to understand that Nineveh was so huge that it took a three-days walk to get from one side to another (3:3). Jonah did not traverse the city. He did not even make it downtown! He went in one day’s walk and dropped his only prophetic word in the book: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (3:4). That oracle loses its punch when one remembers that “forty” in the Bible means “a long time.” So really, Jonah indicated that “a long time from now, Nineveh will be destroyed.” It was hardly a motivational message.

Nevertheless, that grudging word sufficed, and then some. The Ninevite response is comical in immediacy and extent. The people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast,

and donned mourning wear: sackcloth. When the king heard, he upped the ante and declared a fast for humans and animals alike. He further commanded that humans and animals wear sackcloth and mourn because, as he put it, “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish” (3:9).

Picture a stranger visiting Nineveh, the capital of the fierce Assyrians, and encountering 120,000 people, dogs, chickens, goats, and cows all wearing sackcloth and mourning!

As it happened, the king was correct. When God observed their repentance, God changed God’s mind and did not destroy the city.

Jonah 4:1-11 Jonah pitches a fit (scene 4)

Jonah’s furious reaction to God’s mercy is odd for a pious prophet. Jonah anticipated divine mercy for the Ninevites all along, knowing as he did the sort of God with whom he was dealing (4:2).

The Lord found Jonah’s fury inappropriate, so Yahweh attempted to teach the prophet a lesson with a bush that came and went in a day. Jonah oscillated between delight and renewed anger (4:6, 8).

The book ends with a question posed to Jonah. If Jonah could be so concerned about a plant, ought not Yahweh be concerned about Nineveh with its 120,000 confused citizens, “and also many animals?” (4:11).

The answer, obviously, is yes. But the book concludes without telling us Jonah’s response.

The Word Today

Jonah's reluctance to preach in Nineveh is understandable. In the late eighth century BCE, Assyria conquered Israel and nearly destroyed Judah. The Assyrian war practices were always especially cruel and terrifying.

Nevertheless, and as we finally learn in 4:2, Jonah's reluctance did not stem from fear. Jonah fled because he knew that the Lord would make it possible for the Ninevites to escape divine punishment. He knew that Yahweh would extend grace to violent, pagan foreigners, and that infuriated him.

Jonah should have known better. He mouthed the orthodox claims about the Lord. He was, nevertheless, wrong about what that those claims implied for himself. In other words, Jonah turns out to be an angry caricature of an authentic prophet or an authentic Hebrew in the fifth century BCE.

Before we judge Jonah too harshly, we might pause to consider who the "Ninevites" are for us today. Not long ago, the United States and its allies engaged in a war with the descendants of those ancient Ninevites, the Iraqis. The US and its allies remain engaged in a war in Afghanistan with people whose skin color, language, and faith are alien to many US citizens.

One need not look so far abroad, however, to find Ninevites. They are anyone and everyone who we believe—if only secretly—God loves less than ourselves. Ned and Nancy Nineveh are anyone whose creed differs from our own, whose mores vary from ours, or whose skin is a different color. Nancy Nineveh might be the woman whose understanding of the authority of scripture differs from our own. Ned Nineveh might be that gay man, or the

fellow ahead in line at the grocery who does not speak English, or the neighbor who is in the "wrong" political party.

We forget that we are someone else's Ninevite. We forget that a grandmother, a friend, a pastor, a Sunday school teacher—someone!—served as our Jonah and told us about God's abundant love. It is not impossible that that person looked at us like Jonah did the Ninevites. Nevertheless, we heard the word, we believed, and we are still being loved into a new creation. Thank God for that Jonah.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. What is the hardest thing God has ever asked you to do?

Exploring the Word

1. Imagine you are the captain of the vessel upon which Jonah sailed (1:6). What do you think about Jonah?
2. What strikes you as strange about Jonah's confession in 1:9?
3. Who in Jonah 3 wears sackcloth, and why?
4. Complete this sentence: "When I think about the Lord changing the divine mind, I wonder . . ."
5. Why did Jonah flee toward Tarshish? What does this indicate about Jonah?

The Word Today

1. Based on what you have learned from the book of Jonah, what might you say to a family member or friend who speaks prejudicially against an ethnic or racial group?

Closing Prayer

Lord, as we part from each other and conclude our weeks of study, send us into the world as messengers of your love. Help us remember what Jonah resisted: that you intend your saving love to be given to all peoples. Amen.

Further Study

Exodus 3:1—4:17; 1 Samuel 3:1-21; Acts 9:10-19a

Daily Readings

M. Matthew 12:38-42

F. Jonah 4:1-5

T. Luke 11:29-32

S. Jonah 4:6-11

W. Jonah 1:1-12

S. Jonah 3

T. Jonah 1:13-16

Memorization

Jonah 3:10

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.